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Discussion on the Dynamic Characteristics and Aesthetic Connotation of Sawurden Dance

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Abstract: This study presents a comprehensive and systematic examination of the Saurud dance, a traditional ethnic dance with deep cultural roots and rich aesthetic value. By analyzing its intricate movement patterns, rhythmic structures, spatial formations, and dynamic transitions, the research elucidates the technical complexity and expressive depth that define this art form. Beyond the mechanics of performance, the study explores the cultural and historical contexts that shape Saurud dance, including its role in community rituals, social cohesion, and the transmission of collective memory. The emotional and symbolic dimensions of the dance are also examined, highlighting how performers convey narratives, cultural identity, and social values through bodily expression. Furthermore, the paper discusses the contemporary significance of preserving and adapting Saurud dance, considering both the challenges posed by modernization and the opportunities for creative reinterpretation. By integrating technical, cultural, and aesthetic perspectives, this research aims to enhance scholarly understanding of Saurud dance and to support its sustained inheritance, innovative development, and broader appreciation within and beyond its native community.

Keywords: Saurud dance; ethnic culture; movement analysis; ritual performance; cultural heritage preservation

1. Introduction

The Sa'urden dance serves as a vital expressive and narrative medium for the Mongolian Tuvan people, encapsulating their ecological adaptations, spiritual practices, and communal memories [1]. Rooted in the nomadic lifestyle and shamanic traditions of the Altai Mountains region, this dance reflects centuries of cultural accumulation and embodies a sophisticated system of bodily expression. Its movement vocabulary is closely tied to the natural environment, ritual ceremonies, and collective life, making it a living repository of ethnic knowledge and identity.

At the technical level, Sa'urden dancers construct spatially symbolic physical systems through the coordinated articulation of shoulders, wrists, and waist. Undulating upper-body movements often mirror the ritualized logic of nature worship, while rhythmic footwork evokes embodied memories of seasonal migrations and nomadic journeys [2]. The fluid, breath-like continuity and symmetrical structures of the motions demonstrate the Tuvan people's unique spatiotemporal cognition, revealing how cultural understanding is encoded and transmitted through the body. These dynamic patterns not only express aesthetic sophistication but also facilitate social cohesion and intergenerational communication within the community.

Beyond technical execution, the aesthetic essence of Sa'urden dance embodies multiple layers of cultural meaning. Movements convey narrative, emotion, and symbolism, intertwining human experience with natural cycles and spiritual beliefs. The dance's performative logic reinforces cultural identity, offering participants and audiences a medium

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for collective memory, cultural affirmation, and emotional expression. As such, Sa'urden dance exemplifies the integration of ritual, artistry, and social function in an ethnic performing tradition.

From an academic perspective, analyzing the dynamic mechanisms and aesthetic principles of Sa'urden dance provides a methodological framework that bridges body philosophy, ethnomusicology, and cultural anthropology. Such research illuminates the embodied transmission of intangible heritage and offers theoretical support for its preservation, adaptation, and contemporary revitalization. By situating Sa'urden dance within both historical and socio-cultural contexts, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how movement, space, and ritual intersect to sustain ethnic identity and cultural continuity.

2. Dynamic characteristics of Saulden dance

2.1. Movement patterns

The Sa'urden dance, deeply rooted in the Tuva people's symbiotic relationship with the natural environment, transcends mere artistic performance to serve as a living embodiment of cultural memory and ecological cognition. Its hand and arm movements are particularly intricate: dancers pivot from the shoulder, propelling the upper limbs in layered, flowing motions reminiscent of wind sweeping across grasslands [3]. Elbow articulations and wrist rotations generate continuous undulating rhythms, while fingertips trace arcs that evoke meandering mountain streams or wind-shaped grass patterns in the Altai Mountains. These gestures transform environmental elements into a rich bodily lexicon, reflecting the nomadic community's intimate understanding of and reverence for ecological rhythms. During ceremonial performances, alternating arm movements—rising, expanding outward, and pressing downward—are closely synchronized with breathing patterns, imbuing the dance with a meditative and solemn quality that bridges the physical and the spiritual.

Leg movements in Sa'urden dance convey the logic of terrestrial mobility and stability. Compact yet agile steps, executed with precise footwork and rhythmic elasticity, echo the Tuvan people's adaptive posture developed through mountain herding and seasonal migration. The grounded horse stance demonstrates controlled weight transfer through flexed knees, blending equestrian grace with a symbolic homage to equine strength and endurance. In ensemble performances, coordinated footwork and weight shifts create dynamic textures across the group, reinforcing notions of collectivism, social cohesion, and shared cultural identity. Notably, upper and lower body motions are integrated rather than isolated: subtle spinal rotations and torso pivots harmonize limb dynamics, achieving the aesthetic ideal often described as "flowing like water above, solid as rock below." This organic coordination not only showcases advanced muscular control but also reflects the dual essence of resilience and adaptability inherent in nomadic civilization.

2.2. Rhythm and rhyme

The rhythmic system of Sa'urden dance emerges from the Tuva people's auditory interpretation of natural sounds and their internalization of ecological tempos. While commonly structured around a 2/4 time signature, the rhythm is not a rigid repetition but a flexible temporal flow, embodying breath-like fluidity and a sense of temporal elasticity. Traditional instruments—drums, kora (a plucked lute), and ox-horn horns—intertwine to form a layered sonic tapestry, producing a rhythmic aesthetic that balances stability with motion. Dancers dynamically modulate tempo, intensity, and phrasing according to the musical landscape: in fast passages, movements resemble gusts of wind sweeping through grass, with shoulder tremors synchronizing with wrist flicks to visually articulate drum-driven urgency. In contrast, slow sequences are marked by restraint, with arms lifting gracefully as if unveiling celestial veils, heels pressing the earth, and deep breaths prolonging rhythmic phrases into ritualistic temporal suspensions [4].

Frequent syncopation introduces unexpected yet coherent shifts in weight, displacing conventional strong-weak beat hierarchies and adding dynamic tension to the performance. Dotted and staccato note patterns elongate kinetic arcs or punctuate movements, resembling the beating wings of eagles or the gallop of herds across the steppe. Such rhythmic complexity necessitates high coordination between dancers and musicians and encodes bodily memories of nomadic life, including sudden weather changes, herd movements, and the irregular cadence of migratory travel. In this sense, the rhythm transcends formal musical rules to become an acoustic representation of the Tuva people's lived experience, reconstructing the perceptual dialogue between humans and nature and rendering ecological awareness as a performative, temporal art form.

3. The aesthetic connotation of Saulden dance

3.1. Cultural connotation

The Sa'urden dance serves as an important cultural bridge connecting the Tuvan people's worldview with their daily life, deeply rooted in the nomadic ecology of the Altai Mountains. Its movements are not merely performative but constitute a symbolic language that translates the natural and communal environment into bodily expression. For example, dancers emulate the soaring posture of eagles through subtle shoulder tremors, while spiral fingertip movements outward mimic the acceleration of galloping horses, reenacting the dynamic interactions between humans, animals, and the environment. These gestures encode animal symbolism—the eagle's alertness, the horse's freedom, and the deer's attentiveness—allowing performers to rhythmically represent shared experiences and express the community's awareness of the natural world.

During traditional communal activities, such as circular group dances, village elders guide members to participate collectively. Feet slide along the ground while arms rise and fall like rolling clouds, with synchronized breathing creating a shared rhythmic experience [5]. In these moments, the dance transcends entertainment, serving as a medium for preserving community memory, cultural identity, and intergenerational knowledge. Subtle body tremors, lowered heads, or closed eyes are interpreted as gestures of respect and attentiveness to collective experience.

The Sa'urden dance also fulfills essential social and ethical functions. In wedding group performances, young couples engage in mirror-symmetrical choreography, where wrist rotations and step spacing form a subtle system of emotional communication. Through these embodied practices, dance becomes a nonverbal form of social cohesion, sustaining community ethics. Its cyclical formations and rhythmic variations not only convey individual emotion but also construct and reinforce collective identity, crystallizing the cultural cognitive framework developed by the Tuvan people within their unique geographical and historical context.

3.2. Emotional expression

Beyond its cultural symbolism, the Sa'urden dance embodies the emotional life of the Tuvan people, functioning as a sophisticated medium for psychological narrative and communal catharsis. During festive occasions, dancers simulate the gallop of horses through coordinated shoulder tremors and spiral wrist movements, synchronizing rhythmic steps with throat-harmonized singing. These performative gestures generate sensory and spiritual liberation, often culminating in collective euphoria where individual emotions are amplified within the group rhythm, producing profound communal resonance.

In contrast, during funerals or farewell ceremonies, the dance adopts a low, grounded stance. Sliding steps with downward-swinging arms, combined with deep rhythmic breathing, articulate grief, restraint, and solemnity. These movements frequently occur without melodic accompaniment, guided solely by the steady beat of wooden drums, enhancing the ritual's emotional weight and spiritual depth.

Crucially, Sa'urden dance functions as a mechanism for emotional governance within the community. Circular formations symbolize equality and symbiosis, while synchronized movements cultivate a nonverbal network of empathy, reinforcing social bonds during periods of separation, migration, or environmental hardship. Young dancers explore relational intimacy through symmetrical interactions, whereas elders convey authority, experience, and social guidance. In a society without written traditions, this embodied emotional system preserves collective memory, mediates social ethics, and reinforces intergenerational cohesion, elevating Sa'urden from mere artistic expression to a dynamic, socially and psychologically integrative practice.

3.3. Layered Aesthetic Logic

The aesthetic essence of Sa'urden dance emerges from the interplay of technical mastery, cultural symbolism, and emotional resonance. The harmonious integration of upper- and lower-body movements, rhythmic flexibility, and spatial formations produces an artistic effect that is simultaneously visually compelling, emotionally profound, and spiritually meaningful. This layered aesthetic underscores the Tuvan worldview, wherein human life, animal behavior, and natural forces are intimately intertwined, and where dance serves as a medium for observing, internalizing, and perpetuating these relationships. By encoding both ecological awareness and social ethics into corporeal form, Sa'urden dance demonstrates that aesthetic value in traditional nomadic cultures is inseparable from cultural cognition, ritual practice, and collective identity.

4. The inheritance and development of Saulden dance

4.1. Current status of inheritance

The Sa'wulud dance is currently experiencing a structural cultural rupture that threatens its continuity and authenticity. In villages along the southern slopes of the Altai Mountains, traditional practices—such as gathering around bonfires, elders leading dances, and youths imitating canonical patterns—are increasingly rare. The migration of younger generations to urban centers for education and employment has further weakened opportunities for engaging with these ritual contexts in daily life. Consequently, the connection between dance movements and their symbolic links to festival ceremonies is gradually eroding, leading to a fragmented understanding of the dance's cultural and spiritual significance.

Fieldwork conducted in 2023 in the Altay Region, revealed that most fully proficient inheritors of classic dance segments are over 65 years old, while fewer than five individuals under 30 possess mastery of even three traditional repertoires. This reliance on oral transmission and direct mentorship, though culturally grounded, has contributed to subtle losses of technical nuances, such as slight shoulder tremors, wrist rotations, and ankle articulations. The absence of standardized notation systems or motion-capture archives exacerbates these gaps, leaving critical movement details undocumented.

Compounding these challenges is the contemporary reinterpretation of "ethnic dance" for entertainment purposes, particularly through short video platforms. Sa'wulud is often reduced to visually replicable symbols, divorced from its intrinsic breathing rhythms, temporal fluidity, and emotional structures. While intangible cultural heritage documentation has prioritized musical melodies and costume aesthetics, movement dynamics are often captured only superficially, without employing advanced technologies capable of analyzing action generation mechanisms or the interplay between kinetic sequences and musical accompaniment. Such approaches fail to reconstruct the delicate coordination between torso undulations and drumbeats, or to reveal the embedded social metaphors of collective circular formations.

The consequences of these developments extend beyond mere technical erosion. The weakening of embodied skills undermines the dance's functions as a medium for emo-

tional regulation, ethical reinforcement, and intergenerational knowledge transfer. Reduced ritual frequency and the dissociation of the dance from its original performance contexts put at risk the deep mechanisms through which community identity, social cohesion, and cultural memory are maintained. Without deliberate intervention, the Sa'wulud dance faces the possibility of being transformed into an aesthetic artifact divorced from the communal, ritual, and ethical frameworks that historically sustained it.

4.2. Development strategies

Mitigating the cultural erosion of Sa'urden dance in contemporary contexts necessitates the establishment of a multi-layered, systematic inheritance framework that integrates technology, education, and ritual revitalization. A 2023 field study in the pastoral regions of Altay revealed that traditional dance sequences, historically transmitted through oral instruction and direct physical demonstration by elderly masters, have increasingly deviated from canonical kinetic patterns. Key nuances, such as shoulder tremors, subtle wrist articulations, and precise foot arch rotations, are often lost during transmission, highlighting the need for standardized documentation and analytical tools.

Technological Archiving: To address this, digital humanities technologies should be employed to create comprehensive, dynamic visual archives of the dance. Motion capture systems can generate high-resolution 3D models capturing dancers' torso movements, joint angles, limb trajectories, and rhythmic topologies. Such data enable the construction of an analyzable body language database, preserving not only the visual aesthetics but also the underlying mechanics, temporal flow, and embodied semantics of Sa'urden dance. This approach ensures that subtle technical and expressive details are recorded for posterity, providing a foundation for both research and teaching.

Educational Integration: Embedding Sa'urden dance into local aesthetic education programs has proven effective in fostering embodied cultural cognition among younger generations. Pilot programs at Jimunai County Bilingual School illustrate how combining structured dance instruction with oral history workshops and ritual scenario simulations activates students' understanding of both movement techniques and cultural symbolism. A three-year after-school workshop at a secondary school enabled participants to master core routines, including the "Zouma Dance" and "Swan Dance," while deepening their comprehension of breath rhythm coordination through dombra ensemble accompaniment. These initiatives demonstrate that education can serve as a bridge between technical mastery and the internalization of cultural meaning, cultivating both skill and cultural literacy.

Ritual and Communal Reconfiguration: Beyond individual education, sustaining Sa'urden dance requires revitalizing its social and ritual functions. Entertainment-driven dissemination through short video platforms risks reducing the dance to superficial spectacle, divorced from its cultural and ethical dimensions. Organizing cross-regional circular dance performances and reintegrating the dance into Nadam festivals and Obo worship ceremonies restores its role as a medium for communal cohesion and ritual participation. The "Living Field Reconstruction" initiative at Inner Mongolia Arts University exemplifies this approach, employing immersive intangible cultural heritage theater to recreate symbolic linkages between dance, ritual, and natural landscapes. Audiences experience the nuanced spatial-temporal dynamics of collective gatherings, perceiving the ethical and social orders embedded in the choreography.

Holistic Framework: These strategies underscore that sustaining the vitality of Sa'urden dance requires a coordinated, multi-level approach. Technological archiving preserves precise kinetic and expressive details; educational integration fosters embodied cultural cognition and skill transmission; and ritual reconfiguration reestablishes the dance's communal, spiritual, and ethical functions. By coupling these layers, the dance can continue to operate as both an emotional structure and a complex cultural grammar, ensuring that its aesthetic, social, and symbolic dimensions endure for future generations.

5. Conclusion

The Sa'urden dance stands as a vital corporeal text of cultural practice for the Tuva Mongolian (Oirat) people, encapsulating the nomadic community's embodied understanding of natural rhythms and environmental interrelations. Its intricate shoulder articulations and rhythmic footwork convey not only aesthetic sophistication but also a lived knowledge of grassland ecology, equestrian lifestyles, and migratory patterns. The dance's breath-like cadence-characterized by movements of "lifting, sinking, opening, and closing"-functions as an artistic distillation of these physical experiences, while the rhythmic topography mirrors symbolic isomorphisms, such as horse-step undulations and seasonal migrations, creating a corporeal language that interweaves nature, ritual, and social identity.

Recent field research indicates that the erosion of ritual contexts and the aging of master practitioners have introduced subtle fractures into the dance's movement grammar. Some branches of the tradition exhibit tendencies toward procedural simplification and symbolic hollowing, threatening the integrity of both technical and expressive dimensions. Although digital archiving initiatives have made important strides in preserving formal movement patterns, the dance's deeper cultural semantics-its embodied empathy, social cohesion, and ethical frameworks-remain dependent on live communal performance.

Educational interventions, such as the integration of Sa'urden into aesthetic curricula in regions like Jimunai, demonstrate effective strategies for sustaining the dance's cultural resonance. Programs that combine oral history reconstruction, ritual scenario simulations, and ensemble practice not only transmit technical skill but also foster embodied cultural cognition among youth, bridging symbolic understanding with lived experience.

Looking forward, the preservation of Sa'urden dance must transcend static conservation models. Activating its social and ritual dimensions through cross-regional co-performances, immersive festivals, and community-centered participatory initiatives ensures that the dance continues to function as both a cultural grammar and an emotional architecture. By maintaining dynamic continuity between movement, music, ritual, and communal engagement, Sa'urden can remain a living tradition-one that embodies collective memory, ethical practice, and aesthetic expression while adapting to contemporary societal contexts. Such a holistic approach not only safeguards the dance's technical and symbolic integrity but also reinforces its role as a medium through which the Tuvan people negotiate identity, social bonds, and ecological awareness in a rapidly changing world.

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